

ORIGINAL

## Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

September 21, 1999

Mr. William E. Kennard, Chairman  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 Twelfth Street, S.W.  
Washington D.C. 20554

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Dear Mr. Chairman:

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The Telecommunications Act of 1996 establishes a universal service fund to assist schools, libraries, and health-care providers -- disadvantaged by their geography and social conditions -- in obtaining vital telecommunication services. The health-care component of the program, as recognized by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in Report No 99-32, is not working for many rural areas of the United States. We specifically call your attention to the shortcomings of the current program in places like Montana, the Insular Areas and Tribal lands. As a result of the "one size fits all" approach under current rules, some of the very neediest communities have not been able to participate in the program for a variety of reasons.

Presently, health and medical care needs in Rural America are simply overwhelming the available resources. Tele-health and tele-medicine can work to lessen the costs, and at the same time can dramatically improve the quality of and access to needed health and medical care. The Territories of American Samoa and Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (CNMI) are very remote communities, exhibiting typical "rural" characteristics, that have severe health and medical care needs.

These Insular Areas are good examples of rural, remote communities which desperately need to improve the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of health and medical care for their people through tele-health and tele-medicine, but are currently inhibited from taking advantage of these options by the high costs of telecommunications.

We understand the FCC is planning a study into this situation in the Insular Areas. As you undertake the study, we want you to be keenly aware that the Insular Areas are not presently able to obtain needed services through the Universal Service Fund and the health care program of the Universal Services Administrative Company (USAC), despite the fact that consumers and carriers in the Pacific Insular Areas are paying into the Universal Service Fund.

The problem is partly due to designation under current rules of Pago Pago (American Samoa), Agana (Guam), and Saipan (CNMI) as the nearest "urban center," and treating them as separate entities having specialist resources in each of their areas. These designations make it

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impossible for Insular Area health care providers to affordably access specialist medical care providers and educational programs. Saipan can provide services to Tinian and Rota, but cannot gain access to specialist health care providers in Hawaii or elsewhere.

We urge the FCC to re-designate Hawaii as the "nearest urban center" and to treat the Pacific Insular Areas as one region. Hawaii is the nearest urban center that: has a School of Medicine and numerous fully staffed hospital facilities; already works with the region; has access to a network of quality health care providers; and has deployed a distance learning program. Re-designation would allow the LBJ Tropical Medical Center and the Commonwealth Health Clinic that have been working with health care providers in Hawaii, to connect to the State Tele-health Access Network (STAN).

STAN currently provides interconnection to 16 public and private hospitals, the Veterans Administration, and to the Tripler Army Medical Center. STAN, developed in part through the use of the USAC program, is able to downlink and distribute programs offered through satellites over the Continental United States, and also has 15 ISDN BRIs so that interconnections can be made to other tele-medicine and tele-health providers throughout the States.

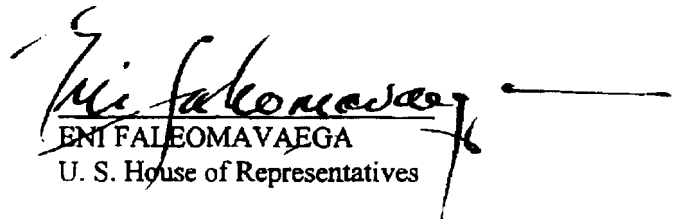
The re-designation we request will enable health care providers in the Insular Areas to obtain access to quality, affordable tele-medicine and tele-health. At the same we urge you to review the impact of the current rules on other rural areas within the continental United States. We believe you will find much of Rural America is being similarly denied full access to vital tele-medicine and tele-health services due to the existing regulations and their application.

Mr. Chairman, we look forward to working with you on these issues of vital importance to rural Americans throughout the country. Please let us know if you have further questions regarding this matter. We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



CONRAD BURNS  
United States Senate

  
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U. S. House of Representatives

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